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Hundreds of asylum seekers in Finland converting from Islam to Christianity

Muslim asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq are converting to Christianity by the hundreds, according to Evangelical Lutheran administrators. A parish in eastern Finland is organising additional religious teaching for the new converts.



Soon-to-be converts to the Evangelical Lutheran faith during a religious teaching class in Imatra. Image: Kari Kosonen/Yle

Finnish Evangelical Lutheran parishes have begun organising confirmation schooling for Muslim asylum seekers who want to convert to Christianity.

Although no exact figures on converts are kept, even careful estimates put the number of emigrants who have renounced Islam in favour of Christianity in recent years at several hundred, according to expert Marja-Liisa Laihia from the church's central administration.

Some twenty young Afghan men are currently enrolled in pre-confirmation teaching at the Tainionkoski parish centre in Imatra, Eastern Finland, where they have copies of the New Testament in the Dari language at their disposal. The teaching itself is in English, with a Dari interpreter on hand via Skype.



Pastor Vesa Julin at work. Image: Kari Kosonen/Yle

The need for special religious education first arose a year ago, coinciding with the establishment of the Imatra reception centre.

"Asylum seekers began attending our services so we reacted by starting up the lessons," says pastor Vesa Julin.

Church sacraments such as the baptism are common queries among the new members of Finland's Lutheran flock.

"I haven't been baptised yet, but I'm looking forward to it and I'm sure I will be a good Christian," Aliraza Hussaini says.

Disillusionment, integration

Many of the new confirmation school students cite a dissatisfaction or disillusionment with the Islamic religion as the reason behind their conversion. All are essentially in exile from their home countries and have been through a harrowing asylum process.

"I haven't been in contact with my family in Afghanistan for a very long time. If they find out I've converted, it would mean trouble for me," Golamir Hossaini says.

Many of those who have renounced Islam say they are treated as infidels in their home countries, and all of them say they do not believe they will ever return to Afghanistan.



The New Testament, Dari language edition.

"They understand that there are different rules in Finland and that people should be treated with respect," Imatra reception centre chief Lauri Perälä says.

Switching faiths can also ease the transition into Finnish culture.

"It's easier to live here because most people are Christian," Hossein Mohammadi says.

In order to be accepted into the Evangelical Lutheran Church, converts must attend and pass the religious training phase, undergo the confirmation ceremony and be in regular contact with the parish for three months. Pastor Julin says the process represents a significant shift in faith and values.

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